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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KOLKATA 000162

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: MAOIST GROUPS STEP UP VIOLENCE IN EASTERN INDIA

KOLKATA 00000162 001.2 OF 002

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Over the past two weeks, there have been daily attacks on police and political party leaders in the Western part of West Bengal, primarily in and around the town of Lalgarh. Leaders of these attacks appear to be members of the Communist Party of India - Maoist (hereinafter referred to as Maoists, otherwise known as Naxalites), but local villagers are also involved. Maoists have also increased attacks on police personnel in the adjoining state of Jharkhand. In addition to an increase in attacks, Maoists have stepped up their public presence by conducting press conferences and public rallies. The Government of West Bengal appears to be paralyzed and unable to effectively counter the Maoist attacks. The West Bengal Police and Central Reserve Police Forces (CRPF) started operations in Lalgarh on June 18. Maoists have called for a two day strike in West Bengal, Orissa, Bihar, Jharkhand and Andhra Pradesh to protest the police action. End summary.

Maoists Increase Violence and Public Outreach

¶2. (SBU) In the past two weeks, Maoists have significantly increased public activities and violent attacks in the East Indian states of Jharkhand and West Bengal. On May 31, Maoists organized their first public rally since 2004 in the town of Banspahari, located in the West Midnapur district of West Bengal. According to media reports, around 300 Maoists wearing olive green fatigues and carrying guns and automatic rifles gathered in Banspahari and moved through the tribal settlements of Belpahari, Shilda, Binpur (in West Bengal) and Chakulia (in neighboring Jharkhand state) and returned to Banspahari, covering a distance of 40 KM. According to media contacts on the site, the police and the district administration did not enforce the law that bans carrying of lethal arms in public.

¶3. (SBU) On the same day, contacts report that Maoists held another rally at in Lalgarh in West Midnapur district. which is about 250 KM west of Kolkata. According to post contacts, between 6,000 and 10,000 people attended the event, which was reportedly organized by Sashadhar Mahato, a Maoist "squadron leader." A man known as Bikash reportedly addressed the rally. Bikash is rumored to be the head of the Maoist zonal committee, covering the West Bengal districts of Purulia, Bankura and West Midnapur.

¶4. (SBU) Media reported that on the night of June 13, ten people died in a gun battle between the Communist Party of India - Marxist (CPI-M) and Maoist supporters in Dharampur village in West Midnapur. Dharmapur is 11 KM west of Lalgarh. CPI-M zonal committee secretary Anuj Pandey told the media that three of the dead were CPM workers and that nine others are missing. According to a journalist in Lalgarh, about 300 West Bengal and CRPF personnel living in camps in and around Lalgarh did not

intervene and withdrew from their camps. According to West Bengal Inspector General of Police (Law and Order) Raj Kanojia, the police were withdrawn from the camps because they were unable to procure supplies locally because villagers were refusing to sell provisions to the police.

¶15. (SBU) On June 15, after villagers from Lalgarh demolished a CPI-M leader's residence and attacked deserted police camps, both the print and electronic media showed Bikash, without his face being shown, holding a press conference with an automatic rifle slung across his shoulder, claiming complete political domination over Lalgarh and its adjoining areas. Bikash also reportedly claimed that his party was supporting local tribals who had so far formally denied their Maoist links.

¶16. (SBU) Jharkhand's Home Secretary, J.B. Tubid, told PolFSN that on June 10, Maoists killed 11 security personnel in a landmine blast near Chaibasa in West Singhbhum district in Southern Jharkhand. The policemen were returning after raiding a village. Journalists told PolFSN that on June 12, Maoists killed nine policemen and injured 10 others during an attack on a bank and a subsequent landmine blast in Bokaro, in Central Jharkhand. Contacts said that on June 16, Maoists ambushed and killed four policemen in Palamau district in Western Jharkhand. Six policemen were injured in the gun battle. The policemen came under attack while they were patrolling the hilly terrain.

¶17. (SBU) Kanojia told PolFSN that Lalgarh is now under Maoist control and they are attempting to prevent the Maoists from expanding beyond Lalgarh. He said police action in Lalgarh and its surrounding areas will be a disaster since the Maoists are using villagers as human shields. He said there are a large number of women and even children who are confronting the police. Kishan-ji (aka Koteswar Rao) a senior Maoist leader, gave a telephone interview to local Bengali media outlets on June 18, claiming that they have never used children and women

KOLKATA 00000162 002.2 OF 002

as human shields, and never will. He said that women have joined the movement in huge numbers and will remain.

Government Response

¶18. (SBU) According to Kanojia, the GOWB is divided about how to respond to the Maoist activities in West Bengal. The consensus among post contacts is that the near-collapse of CPI-M-controlled administrative machinery after the recent general elections has emboldened CPI-M's detractors to show open defiance. In Lalgarh, this show of defiance and acts of violence against anything CPI-M is hampering the state's capacity to respond. At the administrative level, the state police and district administration are unwilling to meet the challenge as the police do not want to risk the collateral damage and the administration has lost the people's support.

¶19. (SBU) Most contacts in Jharkhand believe that the state administration has also become too weak and corrupt to take on the Maoists. Analyst and editor of daily Prabhat Khabar newspaper Mr. Harivansh (please protect) told PolFSN that the law and order situation in Jharkhand has become worse under President's Rule, which was imposed in January 2009. In discussions with PolFSN, J.B. Tubid continues to claim that he has adequate resources to combat the Maoists.

¶10. (SBU) According to Kanojia, the central government has sent an additional five companies (numbering about 3,000 personnel) of CRPF to join West Bengal's local police and existing CRPF personnel (six companies) in and around Lalgarh. This doubles the number of CRPF deployed in the three districts of Bankura, Purulia and West Midnapur. These additional forces first engaged Maoists in Lalgarh on June 18. Contacts confirm that CRPF are also deployed in Jharkhand. It appears from media reports and conversations with police officials that that central and state security agencies are working closely together. The Union Home Minister P. Chidambaram stated in news interviews that the GOWB must take the lead in any police

action.

Comment

¶11. (SBU) While Maoists have conducted attacks on police in Jharkhand on a weekly basis for the past several years, the recent uptick in Maoist violence in West Bengal is unusual. The CPI-M led GOWB has been paralyzed since the Tatas withdrew its small car factory from Singur in October 2008 and are even more so after their poor performance in the Lok Sabha elections.

Indian National Congress (INC) politicians are questioning whether the CPI-M can effectively run the GOWB until 2011 when state assembly elections are to be held, and are asking publicly whether the current government should step down. All India Trinamool Congress (AITC), however, is staying quiet, letting the INC take the lead in public criticism of CPI-M.

Chidambaram's insistence that the GOWB lead any police action in Lalgarh forces the CPI-M to either admit that they cannot control the Maoists or take forceful action that could result in significant casualties. In either case, IATC and INC would benefit politically. The opposition may be using this latest outbreak of Maoist violence to force the CPI-M to step down, resulting in early state assembly elections. This would benefit AITC since it would give less time for its emotional and erratic leader Mamata Banerjee to make a major blunder (something for which she is famous) and would allow the party to take advantage of the current anti-CPI-M wave in the state. While post has not seen any evidence of AITC/Maoist cooperation, the possibility of tacit support for each other cannot be ruled out.

PAYNE